

# South Asia and the United States: An Evolving Partnership



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*Following is an address by Michael H. Armacost, Under Secretary for Political Affairs, before the Asia Society, Washington, D.C., April 29, 1987.*

It is a particular pleasure to address the Asia Society of Washington tonight. I have had a long and happy association with this organization, for the most part in connection with previous duties in East Asia. This is a welcome and timely opportunity to share with you some thoughts on our relationship with South Asia—that quarter of the world that lies between Iran on the west and Burma on the east.

One measure of the growing importance of South Asia to the United States is the time and attention which senior administration officials—myself included—devote to the policy challenges and opportunities in this important group of countries. By that standard—indeed, by any standard—the region is very important, indeed.

## U.S. Interest in South Asia

What happens in South Asia is a matter of consequence to Americans. Our stake in the subcontinent was first expressed in our support for the independence of South Asia from British rule. We saw that states free from outside domination would be the best guarantors of regional security. We appreciated the size and diversity of the populations of the region and its potential for rapid and equitable economic growth. We especially recognized the democratic aspirations

and achievements of the peoples of South Asia, the vitality of their intellectual and cultural traditions, and—more recently—the key roles these countries have come to play in international and Third World fora and their significance in East-West and North-South relationships.

This interest has been articulated by every American administration since World War II. Yet the scope of our involvement, the relative emphasis given to security versus economic concerns, and the priority accorded to particular countries within the region have varied with changes in international circumstances and in the rhythm of American politics. Continuity has not always been our strongest suit as we have sought to balance our regional interests in South and Southwest Asia with our global concerns about the expansion of Soviet power.

Some administrations have pursued close ties with Pakistan, to the detriment of relations with India; others have sought to augment our ties with India at the expense of relations with Pakistan. The Reagan Administration has attempted to forge closer relations simultaneously with both nations. We recognize, of course, the importance of the other countries of the region, and we have also sought to develop further our bilateral ties with them.

Our goals in the area are to:

- Restore Afghanistan's independence;
- Avert a nuclear arms race in the subcontinent;

- Encourage a reduction of tensions between Pakistan and India;
- Stem the drug trade and forge closer international cooperation against terrorism;
- Preserve national integrity in the face of separatist demands; and
- Support moves toward democracy and regional and economic cooperation, including the impressive strides made by the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC).

## Recent Developments

Let me comment briefly on recent developments in some of these areas, and then outline for you the policy principles that mark the Administration's approach to each.

**Afghanistan.** The essentials of the Afghan conflict have not changed in recent months. The Soviets have been unable to translate their massive military involvement into stable political arrangements in Kabul. Resistance to the Soviet presence and its client government continues to grow; and international support for the resistance has never been stronger.

While the Soviets have not taken decisive actions to end their military involvement in Afghanistan, there have, nonetheless, been some significant developments in recent months, some of which enhance the possibilities for a political settlement.

• While the tempo of military action in Afghanistan remains very high, Soviet efforts to shift the burden of combat to Afghan units have largely foundered on the inefficiency and uncertain loyalty of the Afghan military.

• Despite wishful claims to the contrary, attempts to broaden the political base of the Najibullah regime, to coopt or coerce the *mujahidin* into giving up their struggle, and to disrupt the infrastructure of the resistance have failed.

• The Soviets have, more and more emphatically, declared their intention to withdraw from Afghanistan. They claim that the Soviet Army has completed its mission there and that a schedule for its withdrawal has been set. Yet the minor withdrawals implemented to date have been of no military consequence, and the cease-fire proposed by Kabul last January was understandably spurned by the resistance because it did not address the underlying cause of the conflict—namely, the occupation of the country by some 120,000 Soviet troops.

• The Geneva proximity talks continue, the last having taken place in March. Differences on the central question of a timetable for withdrawal of Soviet troops have narrowed somewhat. In the most recent round, the Kabul regime proposed an 18-month timetable; Pakistan responded by indicating its willingness to accept a 7-month withdrawal period.

• The Soviets have belatedly acknowledged that a serious process of national reconciliation must include those who have taken up arms against the regime, the refugees who have been driven from their country, and prominent individuals associated with previous Afghan governments. But Moscow's current approach appears to envisage a coalition government built around and led by the Communist Party of Afghanistan, while including elements of the resistance—a political arrangement that the resistance rejects because it will not work.

• Political consultations among resistance parties have intensified in recent months. The resistance alliance has maintained a common front in rejecting the legitimacy of the Najibullah government. However, differences evidently persist among the alliance parties with respect to who should lead an interim government and how it can best be created.

• While Pakistan continues, with courage and magnanimity, to open its doors to nearly 3 million Afghan refugees, this burden has become much more onerous politically in the face of Soviet efforts to harass and intimidate Pakistan by bombarding border villages,

sowing disinformation, and engaging in sabotage designed to fan ethnic and communal rivalries.

• In our conversations with Moscow, we have reminded Soviet leaders repeatedly of the heavy burden their presence in Afghanistan imposes on U.S.-Soviet relations and the salutary impact an early political solution would have on our ability to move forward on other aspects of the East-West agenda. Yet we remain uncertain of Soviet intentions. On the one hand, they have permitted a more open public and media discussion of their policy in Afghanistan, with General Secretary Gorbachev having taken the lead in declaring before the 27th Party Congress that the war has been a "bleeding wound." On the other hand, they have dramatically increased their attacks against innocent Pakistanis and Afghans.

We do hope that when all is said and done, the Soviet leadership recognizes the rising cost of their present involvement in Afghanistan. They do now appear to see that their original aims are unattainable through military force and that continuing to pursue an inconclusive struggle could seriously jeopardize Mr. Gorbachev's domestic agenda as well as his efforts to create a more flexible Soviet foreign policy. What remains is for them to take the tough decisions that will facilitate an early resolution of the conflict. We will certainly be ready to respond positively if they do.

#### Indo-Pakistani Nuclear Tensions.

Nuclear proliferation in the subcontinent is a matter of both regional and international significance. Both India and Pakistan possess impressive scientific and technical capabilities in the field of nuclear technology. Both have strong economic incentives to develop civil nuclear power programs. Neither has signed the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty, and both have unsafeguarded facilities.

The Reagan Administration certified to the Congress last October its judgment that Pakistan did not possess a nuclear device. Despite recent press stories, we have not changed this assessment. Yet concerns about a drift toward the competitive acquisition of nuclear weapons in South Asia are growing—both here and in the region.

• There is some public support for "going nuclear" in both India and Pakistan—a support based on what we believe to be a lack of appreciation of the costs, risks, and dangers associated with

nuclear proliferation and a regional nuclear arms race. Some public figures in both countries now openly advocate nuclear weapons programs.

• The strains of distrust in the overall political relationship between New Delhi and Islamabad have interrupted a nascent dialogue about nuclear issues, delaying the consummation of a promising agreement not to attack one another's nuclear installations and stalling consideration of other confidence-building measures in this field.

• Increased congressional concerns about these developments have been registered by committee action in both the House and the Senate to reduce the Symington amendment waiver provisions from 6 years to 2 for the next assistance program proposed for Pakistan and to acknowledge explicitly in the law the need for regional cooperation to prevent nuclear proliferation.

As technical limitations on the capacity of Pakistan and India to acquire nuclear weapons diminish, the importance of developing more effective political constraints against crossing the nuclear threshold increases. Fortunately, the leaders of both countries recognize the great dangers and costs they would suffer if India and Pakistan were propelled into a nuclear arms race. We are working to help them build upon this understanding.

Indo-Pakistani Relations. Since independence, tensions between India and Pakistan have complicated our own relations with both countries. While our assistance has been substantial (more than \$20 billion), help to one has frequently been seen as a source of danger to the other.

In recent years, New Delhi and Islamabad have established mechanisms for normalizing and managing their bilateral relationship. During the last year, however, this process has been subject to great strain and again has stalled. Troop movements and exercises along the Indo-Pakistani border in January led to an upsurge in mutual suspicions. And, while the immediate crisis was resolved, the incident served further to complicate the efforts of the two nations to expand bilateral trade and other exchanges, to resolve the Siachin Glacier dispute, and to bridge differences between Pakistan's proposed no-war pact and India's proposed peace and friendship treaty.

The ability of India and Pakistan to forge stronger bilateral ties is fundamentally hampered by mutual suspicions. Each fears that its neighbor is fanning ethnic rivalries. Each is wary of the external defense relationships of the

other with outside powers. While legitimate security concerns are at stake, such perceptions are often exaggerated and inflamed by hyperbolic rhetoric.

Despite these problems, the leaders of both India and Pakistan appear determined to prevent a deterioration in relations. Their periodic meetings have been marked by cordiality and candor. Indeed, summits of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation, to which both are dedicated, now provide additional opportunities where they—and the other leaders of the subcontinent—can discuss bilateral issues.

**National Integrity.** Since the formation of independent states in South Asia 40 years ago, ethnic, subregional, linguistic, and other separatist movements have threatened the national integrity of the new polities. These movements are dangerous in principle and dangerous in practice. For example, the formation of an independent state of Khalistan, as demanded by some Indian and foreign Sikhs, would not only violate the principle of national integrity but would also create a vulnerable and indefensible entity lacking international support and strategic depth. This is true as well of other separatist movements. Furthermore, the multiethnic nature of most South Asian states sustains suspicions that neighboring countries are seeking to exploit unrest among competitive ethnic groups for the purpose of weakening regional rivals. India, for example, has charged Pakistan with helping Sikh militants. Pakistan has made similar allegations about Indian assistance to the Sindhis. We oppose disruptive movements of this kind.

Most disturbingly, violence in Sri Lanka has escalated tragically in recent weeks, as militants calling for a Tamil homeland have initiated a series of brutal bombings and other armed incidents—thus precipitating renewed military confrontation in both the north and the east. The Jayewardene government has responded forcefully. Some civilians have been caught in the crossfire, exacerbating the conflict.

This upsurge of violence has further hardened the polarization of political forces in Sri Lanka, strengthened the hands of those within the insurgent movement and government camps who advocate a military solution, and may have reduced the leverage of India over Tamil militants. We certainly support the efforts of India to bring the insurgents to the bargaining table so that long-delayed political negotiations can be resumed.

**Regional Cooperation.** It is apparent to any observer that the region faces a daunting agenda of political and security challenges, but the states of South Asia are determined to confront them and have been looking for ways to build bridges to their neighbors. We have recently witnessed the development of an innovative instrument to encourage communication and cooperation in the area—the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation, established in 1985. SAARC is a living memorial to the wisdom and vision of its advocate, the late President Ziaur Rahman of Bangladesh.

This regional association has quickly established impressive, firm roots by concentrating pragmatically on economic, cultural, and environmental cooperation that brings tangible benefits to the peoples of the region. The establishment of a meteorological research center, the opening of an agricultural information center, and collaboration in fields such as telecommunications all represent excellent beginnings. SAARC summit meetings have served as fora for discussing arrangements for regional cooperation, and they have also provided opportunities for bilateral meetings among leaders.

### Elements of U.S. Policy

In sum, the current scene in South Asia reflects elements both of hope and of danger. Our task is to nurture the possibilities of an Afghan settlement, encourage Indo-Pakistani reconciliation, and lend support to the growth of democratic institutions and regional cooperation on such matters as drug control and coping with terrorism, while seeking to diminish the risks of nuclear competition and ethnic violence in the subcontinent. With these broad aims in mind, let me comment briefly on the policy efforts we have undertaken in recent months.

**Supporting the Cause of Afghan Independence.** With respect to Afghanistan, there are those who say that we seek to keep the Soviets in Afghanistan in order to “bleed” them; that we covet the use of Afghan territory for strategic purposes; or that our aim is to achieve “historic revenge” for Vietnam. These self-serving misreadings of our objectives could not be further from the truth. Rather, our objectives in Afghanistan are to get Soviet forces out, to permit the Afghan refugees to return home, to allow the Afghans to determine their own political future, and to restore the

country to its traditional status as a neutral, nonaligned buffer. There are two key elements to a political settlement:

**First,** a timetable providing for the rapid and complete withdrawal of all Soviet forces; and

**Second,** political arrangements inspiring sufficient confidence among the Afghan refugees to induce them voluntarily to return home.

The first issue—that of a timetable for Soviet withdrawal—is the only unresolved issue remaining in the “proximity talks” conducted in Geneva under the auspices of Diego Cordovez, the UN Secretary General’s special representative. He has displayed admirable dedication in moving these negotiations along, and some progress has been achieved. More is needed. A lengthy withdrawal period would serve only as a device to demoralize and undermine the resistance while the Soviet Union fortifies its client regime in Kabul. It is for this reason that we support Pakistan’s call for a timetable that is framed in months rather than years.

As for the second issue (which is essentially not part of the agenda at Geneva)—that of political arrangements—the Soviets maintain that the process of national reconciliation has been launched. They claim that it is making dramatic progress—that, at the grassroots, they are gaining the cooperation of resistance leaders who are giving up the struggle to become local governmental authorities, and that, at the national level, they are attracting resistance leaders and other Afghans into a coalition arrangement.

In fact, the *mujahidin* have exhibited little interest in a government of national reconciliation constructed by the Soviets around the current Kabul regime. No significant resistance commander has defected to the regime; no prominent Afghan exile has joined the government; and no significant element of the Afghan refugee community has responded to Najib’s entreaties to return. The resistance insists—and appropriately so—that priority should be given to removing foreign troops from Afghan territory. It dismisses the idea that Najib can serve as a credible agent of reconciliation. It prefers interim governmental arrangements led by those with well-established nationalist credentials.

If the Soviets are as confident as they profess of Najib’s capacity to forge local accommodations, they should promptly withdraw. If they harbor doubts about his staying power, let them

work for the establishment of an interim government headed by Afghans enjoying broader support among their own people.

The Soviets express concern that a rapid withdrawal could result in a "bloodbath" directed against their friends in Afghanistan. Although the Russians have exhibited little squeamishness about the more than 1 million Afghans who have died during more than 7 years of war, their concerns in this regard should not be dismissed out of hand. No one wishes to see further bloodletting. The most reliable guarantee against the settling of old scores, however, is the prompt establishment of political arrangements enjoying broad popular support in Afghanistan. We call upon Moscow to move beyond vain efforts to broaden the base of the existing government and to support a genuine process of national reconciliation. The Pakistanis are prepared to support such a process. So, too, are we.

Pending the achievement of a settlement, of course, we will continue to support our friends. To the freedom fighters, we pledge our humanitarian assistance and other support. To the Pakistanis, we pledge our continuing aid to the refugees, our help in modernizing conventional defenses (particularly air defense), our political support for their territorial integrity, and our diplomatic support in promoting a settlement that takes into account the legitimate interests of all the parties. In so doing, we are not alone. Scores of other governments stand behind the resistance.

**Promoting Nuclear Nonproliferation.** Nuclear proliferation issues touch fundamental questions of national strategy and prestige; efforts to pursue them perforce are difficult and sensitive. Nonetheless, we have made nonproliferation a central feature of our policy concerns worldwide ever since World War II.

In the South Asian context, we have for many years encouraged both India and Pakistan to sign the Nonproliferation Treaty, to accept IAEA [International Atomic Energy Agency] full-scope safeguards, or to enter into binding regional nonproliferation arrangements. All these remain valid objectives. Our proximate aims also include, however, fortifying current constraints against the acquisition and testing of nuclear devices and obtaining reliable assurances that weapons-grade nuclear materials are not produced.

Some believe these goals can best be accomplished by adding new certification requirements to existing legislation on U.S. assistance to Pakistan and threatening a reduction or elimination of

economic or security assistance if such conditions are not met. The Administration has resisted such an approach for the following reasons:

**First, we believe that efforts to alter the conduct of proud and powerful nations through legislative *ultimata* that are seen as discriminatory in character will be ineffective, if not counterproductive; we know from experience.**

**Second, reducing U.S. economic assistance and security support and compounding existing uncertainties about its continuity would only strengthen the hands of those who argue that reliance upon foreign support is inherently risky. This, in turn, could lend credence to the view that only an indigenous nuclear capability will assure an adequate deterrent over the long haul.**

Thus, the Administration has opposed additional certification requirements. It has, however, accepted a 2-year waiver of the Symington amendment in lieu of the 6-year waiver passed in 1981 and a provision in the House and Senate bills that would set this waiver aside in the event India applies safeguards to its nuclear program and Pakistan does not.

This should not imply that we are complacent about the nuclear issue. The debate in Washington is not over objectives but means. The acid test of policy is in the results. The United States can claim some genuine successes in nonproliferation policies over the years. And we must continue to devote an all-out effort to the task. This subject will remain a central feature of our policy agenda with both Pakistan and India. We make no secret of our concerns. Indeed, our Ambassador in Islamabad, Deane Hinton, has underlined these concerns with a candor uncommon for a diplomat. We believe Pakistani leaders fully comprehend the seriousness with which we would regard illegal procurement of sensitive nuclear materials in our country, the testing of nuclear triggering devices, or the stockpiling of nuclear materials that could be readily converted to weapons. I need hardly add that they also understand that existing laws would compel a termination of U.S. assistance if they were to acquire or test a nuclear device.

While we have a facilitative role to play on this issue, the burden of a solution must rest on the countries in the region itself. They must work on a broad front to develop a pattern of reciprocal restraints and confidence-building measures; for, if a nuclear weapons competition develops, it is their security that will be diminished.

We have encouraged a regional dialogue on the nuclear issue, and we have seen some tentative steps in this direction. Pakistan has announced its willingness to sign the Nonproliferation Treaty, to accept full-scope safeguards, to permit reciprocal inspections of its nuclear facilities, to join a South Asian nuclear-free-zone agreement, and to contemplate other confidence-building measures if India is willing to follow suit simultaneously. These are welcome initiatives whose seriousness would be reinforced by Pakistan's ratification of the Limited Test Ban Treaty—a step which India has already taken. The Indian authorities have tended to dismiss these Pakistani proposals as tactical ploys. Yet the ideas have merit, and if New Delhi is not prepared to embrace these initiatives, we would hope they would put forward alternative ideas of their own.

It is vital that the two countries work together in high-level discussions to develop an understanding of the mutual dangers that would result from a nuclear arms race. We thus urge Islamabad and New Delhi to complete a promising bilateral agreement not to attack one another's nuclear installations and to consider, as a step toward broader cooperation, an agreement not to acquire or test nuclear weapons. This, in short, is a time for measures that will assure mutual restraint and generate mutual confidence.

**Bolstering Relations With India and Pakistan.** The United States has, of course, limited influence on relations between Pakistan and India—and properly so. We have important but quite different interests in India and Pakistan. We do not equate the two; we value our relationship with each; and we resist any notion that our ties with India and Pakistan are a zero-sum game. The Reagan Administration's efforts to improve relations simultaneously with both Islamabad and New Delhi have demonstrated results; and they shall continue.

Since the unusually successful visit of Rajiv Gandhi to the United States in 1985, Indo-American relations have—to quote the Prime Minister—improved "tremendously." Our trade with India has flourished; joint ventures have proliferated; and high-technology transfers have been promoted by streamlined export control procedures. We have spurred cooperation in the defense sector as well as in preventing Sikh terrorists from operating in the United States. Cultural ties have been solidified through the Festival of India, and the U.S.-India Fund has been established to support joint research and exchange

programs! Our official dialogue on international political issues continues to mature. These developments reflect our shared determination to build a very strong relationship.

With Pakistan as well, our cooperation has grown, and U.S.-Pakistani relations, as illustrated by Prime Minister Junejo's visit here last year, are strong, productive, and increasingly diverse. We have completed our initial long-term assistance effort and have negotiated another agreement that foresees the provision of roughly \$670 million annually for the next 6 years. We are continuing to supply substantial support to the Afghan refugees in Pakistan; we are working closely with Pakistan to cope with a growing narcotics problem; and we have supplied consistent support to Pakistan's efforts to promote a political resolution of the Afghan conflict.

The challenge of our policy is to improve ties with both countries in a way that will help New Delhi and Islamabad reduce tensions between themselves. Without intruding into their affairs, we have consistently encouraged them to address strains in their bilateral relations in a constructive way.

India continues to be concerned that Pakistan intends to use U.S. arms to strengthen its position against India. Our defense cooperation with Pakistan is designed to modernize its conventional defense capabilities in the light of Soviet pressures in Afghanistan. Our interest is for Pakistan to possess plausible conventional defense forces as an alternative to the nuclear option. It would serve neither our interest nor, I believe, Pakistan's to provide defense capabilities that could threaten India. But we are aware of Indian concerns. Without yielding a veto to anyone over our defense cooperation with Pakistan, our equipment sales will continue to focus on capabilities that respond to the immediate dangers to which Pakistan is exposed on its Afghan border and other modest and reasonable self-defense requirements. The immediate priority is upon augmented air defense capabilities in the light of stepped-up air attacks. We are urgently addressing recent requests for an airborne early warning platform.

**Preserving National Integrity.** America's ability to reduce communal tensions in South Asia is extremely limited, yet we have worked closely with the states of the region on issues that

affect their national integrity. On the question of Sikh violence, for example, the Federal Bureau of Investigation and other government agencies have joined with Indian officials to detect and apprehend terrorists before they act. This cooperation is necessarily quiet and unpublicized, but it is producing results.

Furthermore, we must continue to remind the Sri Lankan authorities that military solutions to the Tamil problem are unlikely to work—even as we urge the Tamil militants to recognize that terrorist tactics will only harden opposition to their political aspirations. We reiterate our call to all parties—particularly the Tamil militants—to come together to achieve a political solution within the framework of a united Sri Lanka. Thanks to the statesmanship of President Jayewardene and the constructive efforts of the Indian Government, considerable progress was made prior to the recent violent attacks. We hope that progress can be resumed, and we are prepared to help Sri Lanka rebuild after the violence subsides.

**Advancing South Asian Regional Cooperation.** The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation is, in our judgment, a flourishing concern. Its members have already identified 10 areas of cooperation, and the groundwork has been laid for specific projects. The long-range value of such ventures is that they build working relations. Over time, these will help reduce the distrust among countries of the region.

We offer our encouragement and our support. The President, in his message to the inaugural SAARC summit in Dhaka in 1985, applauded the foresight and initiative of its leaders and stated that the United States "stands ready to provide appropriate assistance at your request in launching programs of regional cooperation." Secretary Shultz, in hosting a luncheon for the SAARC Foreign Ministers in New York in 1986, repeated the President's offer. We particularly value the potential for cooperation on narcotics eradication, combating terrorism, and improving weather forecasting during the monsoon cycle. Although we do not want to push ourselves on the organization, we do stand ready to help if the countries of the region so desire. That is the stand we propose to take.

## Conclusion

As this brief survey shows, the nations of South Asia face daunting problems. However, they possess considerable human and material resources, and we are pleased that—with the tragic exception of Afghanistan—they have made major strides in achieving stable and secure societies, able to meet the urgent needs of their people and to play responsible roles in the world community. We are proud to have assisted the states of South Asia in these efforts from their earliest days as independent countries. It is, and has been, a cause worthy of our own heritage and our own interests.

If there is one thought I want to leave with you tonight, it is that we have tried—and will continue trying—to construct a durable and a balanced policy toward South Asia, one that reflects rather complex interests: the strategic independence of the subcontinent; nascent cooperation within the region; recognition of the great importance of India, as well as the legitimate needs of Pakistan and others for support and confidence in their security; recognition of the democratic legacy we share with most South Asian states; our deep concern about nuclear nonproliferation; the bright prospects for expanded trade and growth through more market-oriented economies; and our determination to rid ourselves of the scourge of drugs.

While we inevitably have our differences with South Asian countries on one issue or another, we believe that the fundamental interests of this country are in harmony with the aspirations of the South Asian nations. We seek no favored or dominant position for ourselves or bases for our forces; but we resist the efforts of others outside the region to threaten the lives and hopes of the more than 1 billion people who live there. It is for these reasons that I am optimistic about the future. I believe that the evolution of cooperation between the United States and the nations of South Asia will be recognized as one of the major accomplishments of the Reagan Administration. ■

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